

# The Things we use in our Worship

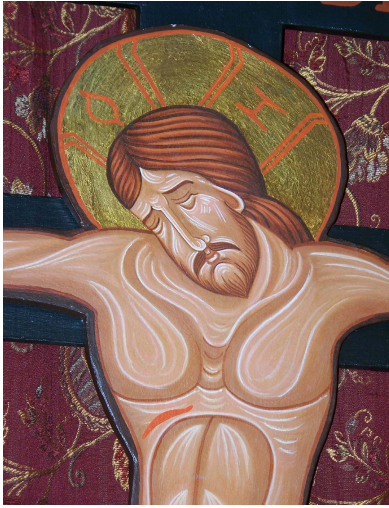
*The Very Rev'd Fr. Nicholas R. Alford*  
*St. Gregory Orthodox Church, Washington, DC*

## Part I

By God's grace, our parish was able to buy a building four years ago. It is a humble, converted row house and when we first saw it, it was a Pentecostal Church, filled with drums and amplifiers and speakers and there was a very large pulpit in the center of a raised platform in the front. All of these things were appropriate for that congregation's approach to worship. In many churches all that is needed for worship is chairs, a lectern and a bible - again these things tell us about their approach to worship.



The way we pray also says much about what we believe, for *lex orandi, lex credendi* - the law of prayer is the law of belief. The way we pray shows us what we believe. One of the first things that a visitor notices in coming to an Orthodox service is that we surround ourselves with many things, beautiful things, holy things in our worship. Our worship is patterned after what we know of worship in heaven, by the witness of Scripture. It is not sparse or minimalist. It is rich and multifaceted. It reflects our offering to God the very best we have; ultimately it should reflect the offering of ourselves, our souls and bodies - everything we are and everything we have - to God.



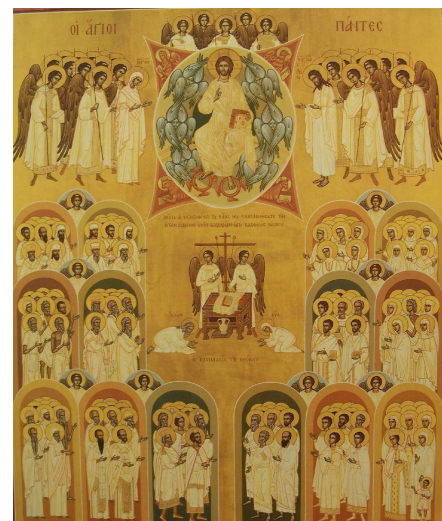
Here we are joining our voices with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven to praise and glorify God and to enter into communion with God, to be fed by His own presence. While the whole world and all of life belongs to God, when we enter into the Church building we come closer to God. We are in His House; we are in His Temple that we may be transformed to be ourselves the house and temple of God when we leave this place and bear His presence with us out into the world.

One of the major, distinguishing factors of an Orthodox Church building is the holy *icons*. We surround ourselves with icons. The icons point towards heaven. The icons show us holy lives. When we see the icons we are reminded that God became a man for our salvation: lived and died and rose again, and now He has gone to prepare a place for us.



We are reminded that He humbled Himself to take our nature upon Himself and He was born of a Virgin Mother. We are reminded of holy men, women and children who have lived Christ-like lives in their own day and age - and that it is possible for us to do likewise. When we see the holy icons we are reminded that we are not alone, but we are

surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, that there is far more to the church than we can see in any one time and place. We may have a few more icons at St. Gregory's than some of our sister Western Rite parishes, but certainly no more than one finds in the ancient churches of Rome; to be surrounded with iconography is part of our common Orthodox heritage, East and West.





When you enter a Western Rite Church, in addition to venerating the icons, you may take holy water from the **Stoup** and bless yourself. As we enter the Church through the waters of Baptism, so we recall our baptisms every time we enter the church building by marking ourselves with the sign of the Cross with water blessed by the priest.

We are also reminded of our Baptisms at the beginning of the Liturgy on most Sundays in the brief ceremony called the *Asperges*, from the opening words in Latin of the chant sung as the priest begins to sprinkle the people with holy water. *Asperges me...* from the 9<sup>th</sup> verse of Psalm 51: “Thou shalt purge me, O Lord, with hyssop and I shall be clean, thou shalt wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.” During the Paschal season, the chant is the *Vidi Aquam*, “I beheld water, which proceedeth from the right side of the Temple...,” based on verses of Ezekiel 47. The holy water sprinkler is called an **aspergillum** and the bucket is called the **aspersorium**.



The focal point of the church is the **altar**. It is here that the holy sacrifice is made. We do not offer the flesh and blood of animals as they did in ancient times; rather we offer bread and wine to God that He may change them into His own Body and Blood to feed His people. We do this because He has commanded us - “*do this in remembrance of me.*” When we do this, in fulfillment of His command, we mystically share in Christ’s offering of Himself on the Cross. In love the Son offers Himself to the Father, in obedient love we strive to do the same, but we do not make a new

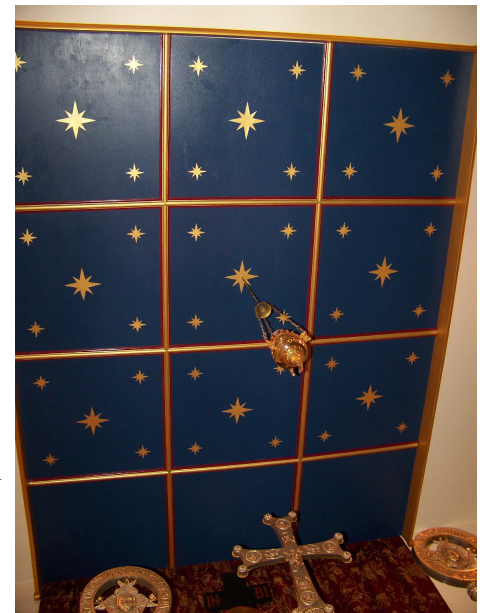
offering, rather we enter into Christ’s offering of Himself in love, in obedience, for our healing, for our nourishment, that we might share in His life. The word altar comes from the Latin *altare* or “high-place,” as altars from ancient times have typically been elevated - an elevated place where the sacrifice is offered. Behind our altar there is a **dossal curtain**, from the Latin *dorsum* or “back.” This is the

simplest form of altarpiece. An elaborate screen behind the altar with carvings or iconography would properly be called a *reredos*.



Our altar, at St. Gregory's, while not a copy of any particular historical model, is made in the old Roman style. While Eastern altars are more commonly square, Western altars tend to be rectangular, to accommodate the actions performed before the altar. Remembering that the Roman Church used Greek in her worship for the first two centuries, we have marked our altar with the Greek letters which abbreviate *Jesus Christ, conqueror*.

Above the altar you will see a *tester*. From ancient times, it has been common to dignify an altar at which the Holy Mysteries will be offered with a covering. St. Constantine presented a great canopy of silver for the altar of St. John Lateran in Rome. The canopy may be of metal, cloth or wood, and may be held up on columns or suspended from the ceiling. The terms Baldachin, Ciborium, Canopy and Tester describe different types of coverings for the altar. The English form of wooden panels within a carved cornice is commonly called a *Tester*.



Here, in this picture from St. Patrick's Church in Warrenton, Virginia, you can see both a *baldichino*, the wooden canopy over the altar, and a *rood screen*. *Rood* is an old Anglo-saxon word for Cross, and the rood screen developed in the West as the iconostasis did in the East.



The altar is adorned with fine cloths. The *frontal* (which is a full covering) ...

Or *super-frontal* (which only covers the upper portion), may actually be made of metal or wood, but most typically is of cloth in the color of the season.



The *fair linen* is symbolic of the burial shroud or winding sheet that St. Joseph of Arimathea used to receive the body of Christ when it was taken down from the Cross.

This same image, of Christ's body being taken down from the Cross, is inscribed in the cloth icon known as the *antimension* (a Greek word meaning "in place of the table"). It may have a small relic sewn into the hem and it is a priest's permission from Metropolitan PHILIP to celebrate the Holy Mysteries. No antimension, no Mass. For those familiar with the old Roman Catholic requirements, the antimension is, in many ways, the equivalent of the altar stone.





The altar is also adorned with *candles*. Candles are symbolic of Christ who is the light of the world, the light that has come into a world of darkness, the light that we are to become. The candles are to be of at least 51% beeswax (in other words, of natural wax) and four or, more typically, six burn for a Sung Mass; a seventh is added when the bishop himself celebrates, symbolic of the seven-fold gifts of the Holy Spirit and that the church is complete or perfect with the bishop, clergy and people present.

The acolytes do not just come up and light the candles with a match and then blow them out later. A *candle lighter and snuffer* is used and there is a set pattern for lighting and extinguishing the candles.



There must be a *crucifix* at the altar; at St. Gregory's we utilize our processional cross, which in turn is flanked by the two processional fans. This set is from Greece, but done in a style that was common to East and West in ancient times.

While today people think of the *fans* as a feature of Eastern Rite churches, the fan or *flabellum* was used in the West until the fourteenth century. Liturgical fans are mentioned in the fourth century *Apostolic Constitutions* and originally served to keep insects away from the bread and wine (and the clergy), but later acquired the symbolic meaning of the angels guarding the altar during the offering of the Holy Mysteries (hence the depiction of



the seraphim on the fans). Most Western Rite parishes do not use fans today, but they are part of our common heritage.



In the center of the altar, behind the place where the gifts are offered, is the **tabernacle**. The Latin word for tent is *tabernaculum* and we recall that the ark of the covenant was kept in a tent; it was the holy place, the place of God's presence. So for Christians the tabernacle is the place of God's presence as well; here we reserve the Holy Sacrament that it may be taken to the sick in time of need and this also gives us the

blessing of having the presence of God with us on the Altar.

We are reminded of this presence by the **lamp** which hangs over the Altar and, when this lamp is lit, we are reminded to genuflect, to kneel briefly on one knee, in reverence when we pass in front of the Sacrament.



An **ablution cup** may be placed near the tabernacle so that the priest may cleanse his fingers before and after he touches the Sacrament when transferring it to a pyx to make sick calls.

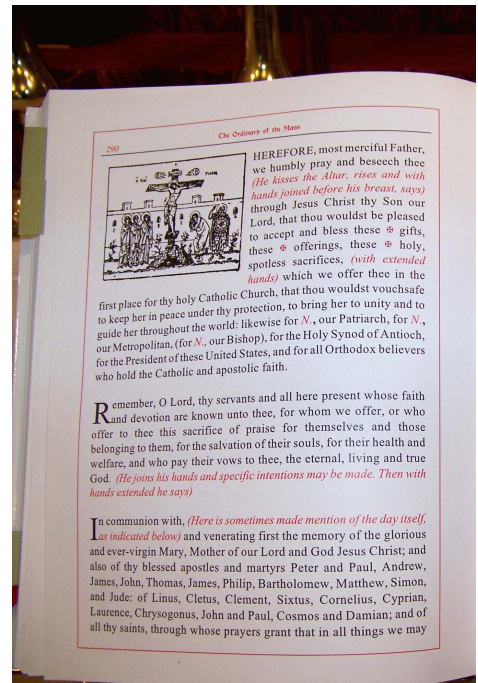
The **pyx** is a small round metal box used to store the reserved Sacrament and one may be used to carry the Sacrament to the sick. In the middle ages, at times the Sacrament was reserved in a hanging pyx, both to keep it out of reach and to make it more visible for veneration. It was occasionally fashioned in the form of a dove, both symbolic of the Holy Spirit and reminding us of the living bread which came down from heaven.





The **Missal** is the large book which contains all texts, readings and prayers needed by the Priest to say Mass. It contains both the unchangeable parts, the *Ordinary*, and the *Propers* which change from day to day according to the feast and season. The Missal is placed on a *missal stand*, which is typically of metal, though it may be of wood or even a pillow may be used.

The Missal also contains **rubrics** or instructions for the liturgies (they are called *rubrics* because they are printed in red - the Latin for *red* is *ruber*).



In many churches, the Gospel is sung from a **Gospel Book**, containing either the complete text of all four gospels or the gospel readings for each Mass. The book is commonly covered with an ornamented cover of metal, showing the great dignity of this book. In other churches the gospel will be sung directly from the Missal.





From ancient times, the Eucharistic Sacrifice has been offered near the *relics* of the saints. Every altar today has relics placed in or on the altar from the time it is blessed. Relics may be displayed in *reliquaries*, which may very be grand or very simple. We are blessed to have relics of St. Gregory, St. Nicholas and St. Sebastian at our altar.

*Continued in part II.*